Flora Brovina Freed

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The decision by the Yugoslav authorities to free Flora Brovina sends a powerful conciliatory signal to the Kosovo Albanians.

A large crowd gathered outside Pozarevac prison this week to witness the release of prominent Kosovo Albanian human rights activist Flora Brovina.

The 50-year-old paediatrician and poet waved to waiting journalists before being whisked away in an International Red Cross car.

Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica's legal advisor Filip Golubovic and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Barbara Davis were at the prison to escort Brovina out of the gates.

Brovina had spent 19 months in the prison. Her 12-year sentence for "terrorist activities carried out during a state of war" had been quashed in the summer by the Serbian Supreme Court. A new trial was to have taken place in mid-November.

One of her former guards, who wished to remain anonymous, said Brovina had been treated well during her detention and had daily access to her mail and newspapers. The guard said Brovina worked regularly in the prison's maternity unit, but had refused routine medical checks herself.

"The release of Flora Brovina and other prisoners is a welcome step, but only one of many necessary to address the myriad human rights concerns in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia," said Amnesty International. "The next stop must be the urgent release of other prisoners of conscience in Serbian jails."

The same weekend, another ten Kosovo Albanian prisoners, held for 15 months without charge, were released from Sremska Mitrovica prison.

Since June 1999, around 1,250 Kosovo Albanian prisoners have been freed, either because charges were dropped or sentences completed. The Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Centre estimates a further 850 ethnic Albanian prisoners are currently held in Serbian jails.

Allegations are rife that some of those already released "bought" their freedom with bribes paid to Serbian lawyers and judges. There have been numerous reports of Kosovo Albanian families raising sums of between 10,000 and 50,000 German marks to "buy" their loved ones' liberty.

Amnesty International believes many of the Albanians detained in Serbian prisons were arrested simply because they were Albanian and not because they were involved in the armed conflict. Many trials were characterised by violations of the defendant's rights, such as denial of access to lawyers and inadequate facilities for the preparation of a defence.

Meanwhile, several hundred local Serbs, abducted by Kosovo Albanians, are still thought to be languishing in privately-run prisons inside the province.
Some members of the new Yugoslav government urged Kostunica to make the release of Kosovo Albanian prisoners conditional on the release of Serbs held in these private prisons and in those run by the United Nations administration in Kosovo, UNMIK.

All the Kosovo Albanian political parties, meanwhile, stress the release of their countrymen is a precondition to any future dialogue with Belgrade.

Some human rights activists in Belgrade praised Brovina's release as "the first sign the new government has formed a new way of dealing with Albanians". UNMIK chief Bernard Kouchner welcomed her pardon as a "crucial step towards healing wounds".

A long-time activist against Serbian rule in Kosovo, Brovina founded the Women's League of Kosovo, which organised peaceful mass protests against the Belgrade regime. Her Centre for the Protection of Women and Children in Pristina provided medical care and rehabilitation facilities for displaced women and children in the province.

On April 22, 1999, during the height of the NATO bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, she was abducted by eight plain-clothes police officers. When Serbian forces withdrew from Kosovo in June that year, around 2,000 Kosovo Albanian prisoners, including Brovina, were transferred to prisons in Serbia.

With the release of Brovina, the new Yugoslav authorities are sending a powerful conciliatory signal to the Kosovo Albanians - and will hopefully lead to an easing of tensions between the two communities.

Another positive sign was a recent visit to Belgrade by Adem Demaqi, another Kosovo Albanian human rights activist and one-time mentor of the Kosovo Liberation Army. Demaci's visit was the first by a prominent Albanian since the end of the war.

Meanwhile in Nis, three Yugoslav army soldiers are on trial for the murder of two Albanians in Kosovo last year. The three were arrested and placed under investigation back in August.

Kostunica vowed on assuming office to restore law and order to Serbia. A prerequisite to achieving this must be the reform of the country's corrupt and politicised judicial system. As well as releasing some political prisoners, the new president has organised a team of experts from the Yugoslav Lawyers Committee to draw up an Amnesty Law for presentation to the first session of the federal parliament.

The new legislation is expected to afford protection not only to those Albanians currently held on terrorist charges, but also to the thousands of young Serbian men who refused to fight in Milosevic's wars.

Branded traitors for their refusal to join up, many who deserted during the Kosovo war still live under the constant threat of arrest.

For Yugoslavia to re-enter the European community respect for the rule of law and human rights is essential. Some tentative steps have been taken but much more is necessary, especially with respect to human rights.

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